

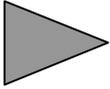
CHARACTER DELINEATION IN AMERICAN MINIMALIST
SHORT FICTION

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Abstract

This article examines the problematic relationship of the self to patterns of all kind as reflected in post-World War 2 American short fiction and highlights specific ways in which language is used to organise the character's 'reality'. We point out how the minimalist orientation in the American short fiction of the late 70s and early 80s, through reductive and allusive techniques, explores the contemporary loss of a sense of history and the moral authority of marginality. Characters in minimalist short fiction are shown to have a static view of life in which things felt but left unstated have value.

Keywords: character, minimalism, short fiction, R. Carver, B.A. Mason

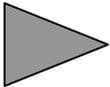


Introduction

Umberto Eco (1992) writes that a text is "a machine for producing Possible Worlds: of the fabula, of the characters within the fabula, and of the reader outside the fabula" (114). He also lists three types of Possible Worlds: a) the Possible World imagined and asserted by the author, which consists of all the states of the fabula; b) the Possible Subworlds that are imagined, believed, wished, a.s.o. by the characters of the fabula; and c) the Possible Subworlds that, at every disjunction of probability displayed by the fabula, the model reader imagines, believes, wishes, a.s.o., and that further states of the fabula must either approve or disapprove.

In its turn, a (meta)text tells at least three stories: a) the story of what happens to the dramatis personae; b) the story of what happens to the naive reader; and c) the story of what happens to itself as a text (which is potentially the same as what happens to the critical reader).

In the Possible World approach, based on Possible World semantics, characters, seen as non-actual individuals, designated by means of a referring expression, are members of some non-actual state of affairs or Possible World. Characters are regarded as life-like persons, "endowed with inner states, knowledge and belief sets, memories, attitudes and intentions, that is, a consciousness, interiority and personhood" (Margolin, 1987:58). This position explains the emotional attachment of the reader to characters as well as the cultural phenomenon of regarding characters as "role models". If characters are full, rounded persons, reconstructing their inner life, the worlds of their private domain, becomes the reader's primary concern. Since fictional characters are incompletely specified by the text, this investigation presupposes the establishment of a set of guidelines for completing their incompleteness.



Self vs. pattern

As Tony Tanner (1971) shows, the problematical and ambiguous relationship of the self to patterns of all kinds -- social, psychological, linguistic -- is an obsession among recent American writers. Tanner speaks of an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices and repudiations are all your own; and also of an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous.

The underlying assumption goes something like: while other countries are ridden by conventions, rules, all sorts of arbitrary formalities which trap and mould the individual, in America one may still enjoy a genuine freedom from all cultural patterning so that life is a series of unmediated spontaneities.

But social anthropology maintains that man has no direct contact with experience and that there is an intervening set of patterns which channel his senses and his thoughts. Behavioural psychology insists that the situation we are in dominates us always. Linguists assert that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. Such theories or assertions have certainly helped to enhance the American writer's dread of all conditioning forces, which is detectable not only in the subject matter of many works of fiction but also in their narrative devices. Narrative lines are full of conspiracies against spontaneity of consciousness. The unease which shows through is related to a worried apprehension on the part of the author that his own consciousness may be predetermined and channelled by the language he has been born into.

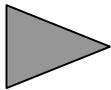
That which defines you at the same time confines you and you are likely to become imprisoned in a system of your own choosing as well as in a system of another's imposing. Still, there has to be some sort of system because you cannot have pure unstructured consciousness nor, as long as you are involved in language, can you have pure unmediated reality. Any writer has to struggle with existing language which is perpetually tending to rigidify in old formulations, and he must constantly assert his own patterning powers without at the same time becoming imprisoned in them. To exist, a book, a vision, a system, like a person, has to have an outline -- there can be no identity without contour. But contours signify arrest, they involve restraint, the risk of rigidity, and the acceptance of limits.

So, the paradox for the writer may be expressed in the following terms: if he wants to write in any communicable form he must traffic in a language which may at every turn be limiting, directing and perhaps controlling his responses and formulations. If he feels that the given structuring of reality of the available language is imprisoning, he may abandon language altogether or he may seek to use the existing language in such a way as to demonstrate that he has the power to resist and perhaps disturb the particular 'rubricizing' tendency of the language he has inherited. He will go out of his way to show that he is using language as it has never been used before, leaving the visible marks of his idiosyncrasies on every formulation.

The compulsion to project the shape of one's own unique consciousness against the imprisoning shapes of the external world is a component of Romanticism, while epistemological dissent goes back at least as far as Blake (in Tanner, 1971: p.15): "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Man's." Coleridge says the same in

different words: "We have imprisoned our own conceptions by the lines which we have drawn in order to exclude the conceptions of others." (Tanner, 1971: 17). Concerned with the relationship self – society and the problem of identity, Whitman himself celebrates both the idea of an American society in which everyone would flow together in a loving 'ensemble' and also the "principle of individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself - identity - personalism." (Tanner, 1971: 17)

So, to a higher or lesser degree, authors of all time have inexorably moved between the non-identity of pure fluidity and the fixity involved in all definitions. The plot, the situation of the character among things, is a reflection / projection of the author's sense of his own situation among words. The author's dilemma can be stated in these terms: can he find a stylistic freedom which is not simply a meaningless incoherence; can he find a stylistic form which will not trap him inside the existing forms of previous literature?



Distrust of language

On second thoughts, this proves to be a double-barrelled question: "What is the relationship of the recent American writer to his language?" and just as valid, "What is the relationship of the recent American hero to his environment?" because, in his turn, the American fictional character has always dreaded utter formlessness, not being a distinct self. Still, any one adopted armour which will contain and give shape and definition to the "jelly" is at the same time felt to be an imprisoning constriction. The obvious solution: dissolve the "character armour"! But then there follows the risk of a return to formlessness. So, the character's concern is whether he can find a freedom which is not a "jelly" and establish an identity which is not a prison.

Thus, the author's problem is basically similar to that of his characters: can the binary opposition fluidity/fixity, social space/inner space be mediated by some third state or term, viz. verbal space? In their compounded effort to find a way out of this dilemma the process of 'calling' assumes great importance.

Naming certainly is a kind of harpooning and though we pin things down when we have defined them, it is an error to believe in the identity of names and things, as Ahab learns the hard way. Things are separate and other from what we call them. As the guardian of language, man is both the carrier of the signs by which and inside which he lives and also an explorer of them. As such, the gradual loss of the possibility of putting together a verbal structure which would offer a stable model of some aspect of the reality around is part of the history of the emergence of

modern literature. More particularly, American writers seem from the first to have felt how tenuous, arbitrary, and even illusory are the verbal constructs which men call descriptions of reality, a fact that accounts for the sense of the futility of pretending that the exactitude of words can ever measure up to the actual mystery of things.

An element of radical distrust of language shows among many American writers, even while paradoxically they must perforce continue to work with it to preserve the extended range of mental possibilities it makes available. On the one hand, there is a suspicion that by living too much in language you may cut yourself off from direct contact with reality (the quest for silence in American literature: "every really lasting story contains at least one moment of stillness that serves as a kind of pivot", R.Carver, 1989: 68); on the other, a liberating feeling that the writer may submit his letters to fantastic embroidery as a gesture of freedom from the restricted vision and impaired perspectives of the community.

To this one should add the tendency of Americans to regard the fictional as the false (a Puritan legacy). Man's power of fabrication, his ability to supplement the given world with his own creations is not necessarily a good thing since these powers and abilities may be cutting him off from 'reality' -- reality being whatever was there before man started heaping up his fictions on it. The feeling that society is an arbitrary system or fiction which one might simply step out of motivates a large number of American heroes. The belief is that outside all systems and fictions, freedom and reality may yet be found. But is it really possible to get beyond systems and fictions?

Hence, much contemporary American writing is foregrounded in an attempt to liberate and explore the potentialities of the authors' own consciousness. Foregrounding also demonstrates one's resistance to, and liberation from, other people's notions as to how one should use language to organise reality. 'Treatment', the weaving of the web, 'the ingenious use made of the material' (H. James) testify to the American writer's struggle to hold out against all recruiting assaults on his own consciousness, if only to secure space in which to experience his own powers of mental arrangement and construction. This attitude of suspicion of the other person's visions and "version of what's real", may lead to reduced (or, in extreme instances, loss of) communication rather than loss of private vision.

We propose to pursue this line of approach in Raymond Carver's and Bobbie Ann Mason's minimalist short fiction which deals, to our mind, with the relationship of language to characters in their environment. We will also look at Mason's story "Shiloh" as an illustration of minimalist strategies in delineating character.

Although minimalist writers are said to be the first to have consistently used reductive and allusive techniques (quick cuts, elliptical dialogue, blunt ironies, and

plain surfaces as narrative devices), these techniques originate in a tradition of short story writing that goes back through Hemingway to Chekhov and Maupassant.

Minimalism in fiction is a reflection of the fragmentary and alienated condition of the 20th century self, a vision of the world that can be adequately described by a particular fictional technique. More than any other technique, it emphasises to the point of cruelty the shortfall between the gifts of the world and our desire for plenitude. Its dominant theme is impassivity, internal blankness and interpersonal blankness of selves as coexisting deserts.

Frank O'Connor's (1963) frustration with Hemingway's "limited scope" echoes that of many readers of minimalist fiction. For if art cannot satisfy our desire to be raised out of quotidian existence, then art apparently doesn't amount to much. Above all, minimalist art does not require moral involvement -- not the author's, not the reader's.

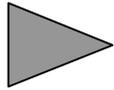
The key precept of minimalism appears to be precisely this requirement that the work be stripped of judgment and invite no judgment; it deletes any visible sign of the work's having an intention upon the reader.

The short story, then, is the pre-eminent minimalist literary form, for if there is scarcely time to develop a round character in a short story, there is even less time to moralise. Minimalist pieces exaggerate perhaps the short story's natural hostility to fullness, most obviously in their ostentatious elimination of moral judgements.

The minimalist short story writer leaves things unsaid, unexplained because he may choose to convey a view of life in which things felt but left unstated have value. (see Kafka's "bulwarks of silence") Also, the compactness of short stories may attract writers to material that reduces the Many to the One, with no possibility of free, complicated choices.

In their turn, fictional characters appear locked in a structure specially designed to fate them to passivity and sameness. Or, adopting a different angle, it is a literature of characters who neither feel nor express much of anything, protagonists in which feeling (as well as memory of or desire for it) is dead. Their typical behaviour, then, is flight from all forms of responsiveness to life.

To be sure, authors seem almost as bored and disaffected as their characters, skeptical as to the possibility of bringing imaginative form to the damaged lives around them. The result is an increasingly fragmented, de-centered world, one in which authors explore the moral authority of marginality (not of failure, as Faulkner or Melville).



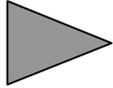
Character in Carver's minimalist stories

Raymond Carver carefully removes himself from any posture that might imply the presence of a moralising author. His characters, however, are universally the victims of the death of morality; they are haunted by the absence of spiritual value and live restless and terrified in a moral void. Readers find Carver's stories either fascinating or irritating, the latter category complaining that his "characters are hardly garrulous; their talk is groping, rudimentary" (J. Atlas, 1981, p.18), and essentially they have nothing to say to one another. Less is less, they consider, and minimalism may offer the stories 'bleak power' only if the reader generously fills in the gaps caused by the author's absence and the character's lack of eloquence. Finally, such 'perfect economy' presupposes that "the writer's responsibility is only to register what is true in a literal, documentary sense" (J. Atlas, 1981: 18).

In the harsh paradigm Carver establishes in the early stories, his characters are unlikely candidates for a philosophical quest into meaning. Muddled and immobilised, they seem incapable of even an attempt to save themselves. Worse -- and emblematic perhaps of a greater despair, a cultural hopelessness -- they seem reduced to the level of static mannequins, deaf to and mute about their situations. Often, we find them shrugging, not even dimly aware of lives fuller than their own.

In the late stories, though, Carver affords his characters the gift he has always granted the reader: some light by which to navigate, the chance for insight, a greater range of freedom and personal choice, and, by implication, the moral responsibility such an unfettering demands. Simultaneously, there arises a new threat, the risk that they would be incapable of making anything of their freedom. Where once characters could resign themselves to the silly despondencies of complete loss, in the new mode they have to wonder anxiously when their chance to be lifted out of misery and meaninglessness would come. However, the new protagonists deserve saving, for they struggle -- with varying degrees of awareness -- to keep themselves open to the sudden invasion of feeling and meaning.

Carver writes: "There has to be tension, a sense that something is imminent ... or else, most often, there simply won't be a story" ("Fires", 1989: 54). Actually, there are more than artistic or technical reasons for this tension: what is usually at stake is a character's identity, a character on the brink of being and not being. Analogous to danger and the fear of death for a character is the possibility of a story not being written, or not being read, and that very fear and possibility make the story.



Character in B.A. Mason's minimalist stories

Bobbie Ann Mason's characters are working class Americans who are confused and disillusioned with the American dream they watch on the TV screen every night. They have managed to survive without protesting in a world with reduced economic and emotional possibilities. Their anxieties and disappointments are instead displaced through drug and alcohol use and through an even more deadening activity: a steady focus on the random details of everyday life.

Like most contemporary American writers of the South, Mason has long shifted the focus of her attention from the disintegration of society and its valued traditions to the disintegration of the self and what that shift usually brings about is an exploration of individuals whose interior life is in shambles and who are adrift in a meaningless world. History has little to offer these individuals; their struggle to survive has less to do with historical roots (history is no longer a vital force in a world without traditions) than it does with the effort to overcome feelings of loneliness and abstraction.

It hardly comes as a surprise, then, that Mason should be interested in culture shock and its jarring effects on an individual's sense of identity. Her stories explore the confusions and isolation of the individual in a world gone awry, focusing most often on people from small towns in western Kentucky struggling to adapt to contemporary life. Gone from the world of these stories is a Southern society of tradition and community, a society that Allen Tate saw as guiding and shaping personal consciousness. Mason's world is one cut off from tradition whose inhabitants live in a continuous present and grapple less with problems of right and wrong than with matters of technological progress and utility.

Living without a sense of history, Mason's characters turn for guidance to the spokespeople of contemporary culture. Understandably, her characters possess a degree of individual freedom. Their places in society, unlike those of their forebears, are no longer so rigidly defined. But this freedom comes with a cost. They frequently suffer from extreme insecurity and, to compensate for the absence of a moral vision that could give their lives direction and commitment, they look to self-fulfilment as the ultimate ideal.

In such contexts the sense of self is besieged from all sides and becomes highly vulnerable. As Hardison (1981) observed, "Identity seems to be unshakable, but its apparent stability is an illusion. As the world changes, identity changes ... Because the mind and the world develop at different rates and in different ways, during times of rapid change they cease to be complementary ... The result is a widening

gap between the world as it exists in the mind and the world as it is experienced - between identity formed by tradition and identity demanded by the present" (61).

Mason's stories document many efforts to bridge such a gap. Although the behaviour of her characters is diverse, a basic pattern is nevertheless apparent. When faced with confusion about their proper roles, they tend to become doers, that is, they attempt to construct a new identity. The pattern is deeply entrenched in American history and it reflects the Puritan emphasis on building a new order through work.

One good example of a character who attempts to construct a new identity is Norma Jean Moffitt in the story titled "Shiloh" (1982). Norma Jean's efforts to build a new body by lifting weights reveal also her efforts to build a new self. When she is no longer sure what to make of her husband and her marriage, she frantically makes all sorts of other things. By playing electric organ music she strives for new harmony. By cooking exotic new foods she hopes to become what she eats.

Leroy, her husband, finds his life disrupted not only by the trucking accident that has rendered him disabled and unemployed, but also by the changes that are occurring in their hometown in Kentucky ("Subdivisions are spreading across western Kentucky like an oil slick". Mason, 1982: 38). No longer king of his castle (Le roy), he too is obsessed with making things. He passes his time smoking marijuana and building craft kits as if putting together these small parts could create a more comprehensive sense of order. No doubt he is also seeking craft in its root sense of power or strength. In an effort to create a real home, Leroy is even thinking of building a full-scale log house from a kit. Having failed to make a family because of the accidental death of their baby, he and Norma Jean must now create a new marriage.

Mason foregrounds details to emphasise the static, spatial nature of the characters' lives. By casually (and consistently) referring to commercial items -- using brand names instead of types: Coke, Lincoln Logs, and the Donahue Show instead of soda, toy logs, and TV talk shows, Mason disrupts the reader's conventional expectations for more universal details and forces us to focus on the day-to-day detail. The characters, setting, and situation are revealed in *Shiloh* through an accumulation of synecdochic details. Both the narrator and Leroy concentrate on the particular as a substitute for the general, thus emphasising the latter's inability and unwillingness to understand his environment and his wife, who is revealed through Leroy's consciousness as a series of anatomical details. The narrator concentrates on her body parts, foregrounding her pectorals, her legs, her arms, her knees, her ankles, her hard biceps, her chest muscles. Norma Jean is never depicted as a whole person because Leroy and the empathic narrator are unable to see her in

that way. The act of building, then, offers the reader a framework for understanding this story.

When a scene ends, it almost always ends with a focus on a specific image. After Norma Jean complains to Leroy about comments her mother had made about a baby who was killed by a dog, Mason ends with a detail: "For a long time they sit by the kitchen window watching the birds at the feeder." (42) Then silence, switch of scene. Leroy does not answer. Are the birds random details selected so that we can experience his loss of words? Or are we to make an analogy between the characters and the feeding birds? These details are selected out of a whole context and offered to us as lingering details, parts of a whole. This final image stands out, causing the narrative to come to a standstill, displacing Leroy's and Norma's pain about their failing relationship and the earlier loss of their baby, by concentrating on another aspect of the context. These details also cause the reader to hesitate for a moment and to make comparisons within the context, finding a metaphoric framework in which to understand the situation.

Similarly, Leroy's truck is now "a huge piece of furniture gathering dust in the backyard" (44). His world is disintegrating into details, and he cannot decide what to do, so his wife (who would rather have him on the road: "In some ways, a woman prefers a man who wanders", 44) has to decide for him. She reads from a list: "Things you could do: You could get a job as a guard at Union Carbide, where they'd let you set on a stool. You could get on at the lumberyard. You could do a little carpenter work, if you want to build so bad" (44). Leroy's passive focus on random details deflects the pain he is feeling and reinforces his unwillingness or inability to come to terms with his situation, to make connections between details, his life, and the greater public situation. He is out of date, a failure in terms of the myth of progress, attempting to move backward in history instead of forward into the future where opportunity supposedly lies for someone who believes in the American dream. In essence, he plays with the idea of acting on his observations, whereas Norma Jean actually acts.

As a general observation, throughout Bobbie Ann Mason's work, women are the better survivors; they react to their frustration and discontent more forcefully while the males seem the more affected and more ineffectual in their attempts to seize or to create some new centre for their lives. Leroy is, like the truck, a random insignificant detail, and a useless piece of old furniture. And Norma Jean is cleaning house. She does not use direct confrontation; instead, she seeks to create emotional distance by taking up a series of activities that pointedly exclude Leroy. After all, the fifteen years of living by herself had developed a cherished independence in her which she finds hard to give up.

Mason's examples (Leroy's body, the truck, the car, the craft kits) and the use of trade names, anatomical details in place of the whole, foregrounded details are

meant to focus our attention on the "part" rather than the "whole". These synecdoches create a kind of understatement and at the same time an aura of shared knowledge between reader and narrator, whose voice is hesitant, uncertain whether what he has to say is important enough to be told, uncertain whether anyone will listen.

The parallels between building up strength, building a model house, building a meaningful relationship, and building a future do not quite work. Norma Jean does improve her physical fitness but Leroy's house is never built, and their relationship is falling apart. She enters the mainstream, but in the process she begins to lose her culture and community. One cannot "build" to improve, especially if the foundation -- history, relationships, and community -- is being demolished.

While Mason establishes a tension between a traditional past and a modernist present, very similar to the paradigm found in much of the literature of the Southern renaissance, she does so only to show how this tension no longer carries any significant weight and authority; only in moments of crisis or in unusual situations does the tension surface, and then it usually leads merely to momentary insight.

Her characters, who often focus their attention for fulfillment entirely on the present moment, cultivate a detachment from the past so that whatever meaning it potentially carries is reduced either to mere nostalgia or intellectual curiosity. In both cases history becomes a set of experiences that bears little relevance to one's present life.

In order to better appreciate the potential implications of Bobbie Ann Mason's and Raymond Carver's minimalist prose, the reader must be willing to suspend the interpretive moment, read syntactically, literally first, witnessing and sharing the consciousness and experiences of the narrator and character until the scene and story is finished; then the prose offers a way to resolve the dilemma presented: a metaphoric frame for comparison and reflection, an afterthought for grappling with meaning, a hope for resolution. With a responding reader, minimalist fiction of this kind becomes a powerful reaction to and interpretation of daily life. The readers have to do their part, to make connections, bring insight and resolution, provide the reasoning, question, revise, accept and, last but not least, care about the characters and their predicaments.

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